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AUTHOR Dyson, Margaret
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ABSTRACT

Thirty-five children with reading problems received lessons by mail for 6 weeks in the summer. Lessons included illustrations and pictures and provided tokens for motivation. Significant differences were found in pre- and posttest gains in reading achievement between Ss and a control group. Subsequent studies demonstrated further value of correspondence instruction, including improved attitudes and increased favorable parental and teacher reactions. (CL)

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# TEACHING READING BY CORRESPONDENCE TO CHILDREN WITH READING DEFECTS

Margaret Dyson, Ph.D.
Learning Disabilities Teacher
Champaign Public Schools, Champaign, IL

## Introduction

Teachers frequently express the belief that some elementary school children fail to maintain their reading skills over extended vacation periods. This seems particularly evident for children with reading deficits. Since such children do not find reading as easy or pleasurable a task as do skillful readers, they are apt to do little if any reading over summer vacation. Reading techniques, not yet securely learned, are not practiced, and the progress of children who are beginning to "catch up" may come to an abrupt halt.

To encourage children with reading deficits to read over summer vacation, and as an alternative to more conventional methods of summer instruction, a program of correspondence instruction in reading was initiated for the elementary schools of Champaign, Illinois. This program was funded as a Title III Minigrant for one year, and subsequently for three more years by Title IV-C as an innovative program. A fifth year (1979) was funded by the local school district.

Letters explaining the requirements of the correspondence program to be conducted during the summer were sent to parents of children receiving Learning Disabilities, Title I, or Title VII services during the academic year. Numbers of children instructed in the program increased from 35 the first year to more than 90 the third, fourth and fifth year of the program. Grade levels ranged from Grade 1 through Grade 4.

Control groups were composed of children who were eligible for Learning Disabilities, Title I or Title VII programs during the academic year and who were not enrolled in summer school.

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The program extended for six weeks, beginning on July 1. All eligible children were pre-tested at the end of the academic year, and children in the treatment group and controls were post-tested at the beginning of the school year in August-September.

Description of the Intervention

Children in the treatment group received lessons by mail for six weeks. Each lesson was designed to require about 4 or 5 days, and the child was instructed to spend about 25 minutes each day on the lesson.

Lessons were mailed in a distinctive envelope, addressed to the child. A stamped envelope was enclosed for the lesson's return. Each lesson included a book, a letter to the child, two lesson sheets based on the book the child had received, a lesson sheet containing an additional activity, and an evaluation sheet for the child and/or the parent, and to some students a story on a tape cassette. All lessons were addressed to the child, and the child was requested to transmit necessary information that was included for parents.

Books selected for the program were chosen from those that did not "look like school readers." The program originally started with the Monster books (by Bowmar), and Bill Martin Read-Along books. These books and attractive paperback books by many authors and publishing companies have proved popular.

The use of pictures and illustrations was considered important. Work sheets that were written to accompany the books, as well as the letter and the envelope, always had an illustration especially designed for that purpose. Lesson sheets were printed for easy reading. Every effort was made to have type large and clear. Work pages were very carefully written and were so designed that the child could complete them with very little help from anyone else.

Work pages were color coded--work pages accompanying the book were green and blue, additional pages were pink, and evaluation sheets were yellow. This made each sheet easily identifiable.

Treats and tokens were an important method of motivation. For example, 31 sight words (or less for younger children) pronounced to parents were rewarded by coupons for ice cream cones from the "31 varieties" of ice cream. Answering questions brought coupons for hamburgers, milk shakes and fries. The first weekly lesson usually contained crayons, and perhaps a pencil and a sharpener. When the final lesson was returned, a colorful folder, ruler, or pen or pencil which could be used for school was given to the child.

Children who had been randomly placed in the cassette recorder group received the story on tape to listen to as they followed along in their book. They also received a blank cassette tape on which they recorded their reading of the story. Children without cassette recorders were encouraged to read their story aloud to someone.

Parent Involvement

For obvious reasons, parent involvement is very important in correspondence instruction. Each year a parent meeting was held near the beginning of the program. Meetings were held both during the day and in the evening to make it possible for as many parents as possible to attend. At this meeting the program was explained and suggestions for its implementation were made. These suggestions included the importance of having a regular time for the reading lesson, turning off the TV, showing an interest in the child's work, how to help the child with reading his book, and above all, to make the summer program an enjoyable one. Parents were instructed to be sure that the child understood the instructions in the letter, and to answer questions. Parents were encouraged to telephone

the correspondence staff, and to encourage the child to do so if help was needed. One summer a personal conference was held with every parent. Telephone numbers were always listed on the letter to the child. A program policy was to be supportive of parents and to express appreciation for their help.

## Other Aspects of the Program

Unlike other correspondence programs, this correspondence program in reading had a time schedule for lesson completion. The child was encouraged to work 25 minutes a day for four to five days a week, and to mail his lesson back promptly. Lessons were always mailed on a specific day, whether or not completed lessons had been returned. However, when a child fell behind in returning lessons, telephone calls or even home visits were made.

## Evaluation

Pre and post word recognition tests were administered each year during the four years of government funding. Word recognition tests used were the Wide Range Achievement Test; the Slosson Oral Reading Test; and the Program Word Test, a program-developed word recognition test of words contained in the books and other materials used by children in the program.

## Test Results

In 1975, 35 children were in the experimental group and 35 children were in the control group. On the reading section of the Wide Range Achievement Test, students in the treatment group had a mean gain between pre-and post-tests of 0.1 grade equivalent (GE) units (standard deviation .369). A *t* test indicated that the gains by this group were significantly greater than zero at the .05 level. While the control group lost .08 units (SD .196), between pre-and post-tests, this decrease was not significantly different than zero at the .05 level of confidence, although it was at .10. A correlated *t* test indicated the

difference in performance between the experimental and control groups to be significant at the .01 level.

In 1976, the treatment sample consisted of sixty second and third grade children, and compared four treatments: Group A used cassette tape recorders with their correspondence instruction and training sessions were offered to parents; Group B had correspondence instruction and training sessions for parents; Group C had correspondence instruction and casette tape recorders; Group D had correspondence instruction only. A control group of 30 students received no reading instruction during the summer.

The children in the experimental and control groups were tested with a battery of three tests. Pre-and post-test scores on the Wide Range Achievement Test showed mean gains in performance for the four treatment groups. When the four groups were pooled to form a single treatment group, the mean gain of .21 GE units (SD .458) on scores of this pooled group was significantly greater than that of the control group at $p < .05$. The control group had a mean gain of 0 (SD .432) on this test.

An analysis of variance of the gain scores of the individual groups did not indicate significant differences among the treatment conditions. Consequently it was not possible to form conclusions about the relative effectiveness of the use of tape recorders, parent training, or a combination of these factors, in a correspondence setting.

In the summers of 1977 and 1978 more than 90 children were enrolled each summer in the correspondence instruction. Both years the Slosson Oral Reading Test was administered as a pre-and post test. Combining the 1977 and 1978 results for the Slosson Oral Reading Test indicated that the experimental group performed significantly better ($p < .05$) than the Control Group. For each year's

data the improvement in test scores was used to compare experimental and control groups. A simple one-sided t-test showed a significant difference ($p < .05$) indicating greater improvement by the treatment group in 1977 and a suggestive but not statistically significant difference in 1978. Fisher's procedure* for combining significance levels of separate experiments indicates that such a pair of significant, and nearly significant, results in consecutive years would occur less than 5% of the time purely by chance.

Results obtained from the Program Word Test administered in 1978, the fourth summer, also indicated that it is possible to show an improvement in word recognition through a correspondence course. The Program Word Test was based on words occurring in books read by all the first and second grade children, and on other words introduced to children in grades 1 through 4 in lesson materials.

The Program Word Test consisted of 52 words, 40 of which were taken from a group of 15 books used for instruction by the first and second grade students, and 12 words were taken from work sheets and correspondence sent to all of the students. The complete test of 52 words was administered to first and second grade students, and a 12 word test was given to the third and fourth grade students. The test was reviewed by an independent consultant for validity, and reliability was established by the test-retest method. The correlation between the results of the tests was calculated and the reliability coefficient was 0.991.

Analysis on the change in word recognition scores for each student was carried out separately for the first and second graders who received a 52 word test and for the third and fourth graders who received a 12 word test. In each

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* Fisher, Sir Ronald A., Statistical Methods for Research Workers, 12th Ed., 1954. Hafner Publishing Co., Inc., New York, p. 99.

case a two way analysis of variance (3 program groups x 2 grades) was used to test for the presence of program group differences. Post-hoc tests, based on the Bonferroni Method were then used to examine whether (1) the mean improvement in Group A and B combined was larger than in Group C, and (2) the mean improvement in the two target groups differed. A one-sided test was used for (1); a two sided test was used for (2).

For grades 1 and 2 the analysis of variance showed the groups varied significantly ($p < .005$), and post hoc testing showed Groups A and B combined performed significantly better than the control group C ($p < .005$). The Group A students (with tape recorders), especially in the first grade, performed better than those in Group B (without tape recorders). However, the difference between Group A and Group B was not large enough to be statistically significant when using multiple comparisons methods.

For grades 3 and 4 the results were similar, but, with a shorter test, the significance levels were more modest. The three program groups differed significantly ($p < .05$), and the Target Groups A and B combined, performed significantly better than the Control Group ($p < .05$). Group A performed somewhat better than Group B but the difference was not statistically significant.

Additional Data

There is some evidence that over the summer, students in the treatment group developed a more positive response to the question "Do you think reading is important outside of school" than those in the control group. Changes in attitude scores between target and control groups were examined with a Wilcoxon rank sum test for the years 1976, 1977, and 1978. Fisher's procedure for combining separate test significance levels was used to show that when combined over the three-year period, the results were significant ($p < .05$).

Each summer children and parents were asked to respond to questionnaires. In 1977 63% of the children stated that they liked the correspondence program "a lot"; in 1978 55%. In 1977 32% said "it was OK"; 42% in 1978. 5% in 1977 and 3% in 1978 "didn't like it very much". 79% of the children in 1977 and 80% of the children in 1978 said that they would like to get lessons from the correspondence program again.

The response to the parents' questionnaire indicated that 85% in 1977 and 93% in 1978 believed that their child read as well or even better than he had when school stopped in June. Some of the statements they made as to what the correspondence program did for their child were as follows:

> We believe your lessons helped Patrick to <u>want</u> to read. Before your lessons, he wouldn't volunteer to pick up a book. He seems to enjoy reading more now.
>
> It's a good program for parents who want to help their child. Too often I've been given generalities when I've needed specifics. And this was specific.
>
> If I had made him read on his own it might have been a chore to him. He was excited about the lessons.
>
> I feel it helped him to hold on to the skills he learned last year so that this fall he might be ready to start where he stopped instead of backtracking.
>
> He felt successful in the program.

Things that the parents and children liked best about the correspondence program were as follows:

> .....that I was able to sit down and just spend some time on her.
>
> He enjoyed the books themselves and getting his own mail.
>
> It gave him something every week to look forward to getting in the mail, which he thought was just <u>super</u>. He was able to do the work and was not under stress.
>
> The tape recorder and the interesting little stories that were sent. He really liked hearing the person on the tape. He also liked to grade whether he liked his lesson or not.

He gets to plan his own time. It helps him read and follow directions, not just story reading.

Mail for her, with her name on it.

I appreciate the convenience.

We both enjoyed the lessons. Some of the stories he read out loud several times. After the lesson was done, Steve would often remember a funny part and he'd talk and laugh about it.

Teachers were also asked to comment on the summer correspondence program. One teacher especially praised the training parents received. She felt that the training to help parents supervise home reading tasks during the summer carried over to supervision of homework during the school year.

Other comments from teachers included;

The attitude of children who have been in the correspondence program often improves and their reading is helped by the program.

I continue to hear many positive reports from parents about how much their reluctant readers really enjoyed the reading-related activities in your program. Your program is presented in a way so as to encourage independence. No tutoring help or summer school can achieve this end.

This is a very valuable experience for many who do not attend summer school. I would hate to see it discontinued.

## Conclusions

Results of the study suggested that the children in the treatment group, and their parents and teachers, were pleased with the program. Most parents, responding to a questionnaire, expressed the belief that the program had met a need for their children to do meaningful reading during the summer. The test data confirmed this.